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JAMES ALEXANDER. *Shaw's Controversial Socialism*. The Florida Bernard Shaw Series. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009. Pp. xvii + 292. \$69.95 (Hb).

Reviewed by Anna Vaninskaya, University of Cambridge

In 1917 George Bernard Shaw wrote a short variety sketch entitled *Annajanska, The Bolshevik Empress* in which he got the Russian Revolution spectacularly wrong. This sketch, despite its subject-matter, does not feature in James Alexander's *Shaw's Controversial Socialism* – perhaps because it occupies as insignificant a place in Shaw's oeuvre as *Vera, or the Nihilists* does in Oscar Wilde's, perhaps because it postdates Alexander's chosen timeframe of 1882-1904, but most likely because any consideration is ruled out by the stringency of Alexander's adherence to his thesis about the "absolute incommensurability between the plays and the politics" (219). Alexander's concern is solely with the latter: though Shaw's "interest in politics was at least in part ... dramatic" (68), "it was in politics, rather than in the drama, that he transcended his individuality" (5). The characters in the plays were nothing more than aspects of Shaw, but in politics Shaw was himself "an actor, a character, playing a part" (6). Socialism was "about activity," the "plays were about talk" (130), and Alexander dismisses any comparison between the two on the basis of their insurmountable "difference in *form*" (219).

It is a distinction the reader has to accept on faith in order to judge the book on its own terms. Despite the occasional aside on the plays' "historical sensibility" (41) or a brief elucidation of the contemporary prototypes of various characters and scenes (69, 131), the discussion remains squarely in the realm of politics. Much as one may wish for more details about "The Revolutionist's Handbook" or *John Bull's Other Island*, in lieu of yet another example of Shaw's understanding of marginal utility, they remain confined to a few pages in

the body of the text (see 175-80) and the Conclusion, which presents, almost as an afterthought, the only sustained examination of the relation between the plays and the politics. But the tantalising remarks on Shaw's prefaces or on *Man and Superman* are the stuff of literary criticism, and to sigh for more in this vein is to ask for a very different book. Alexander's aims and interests are not those of literary or dramatic critics, and if the study has any flaws they are to be found in his falling short of his own goal, not in failing to accomplish what he never set out to do.

The book has a clear narrative trajectory, tracing Shaw's changing views of politics and economics, in England and on the Continent. The first chapter deals with Marxist, Fabian, Ricardian, and Jevonian economic theories of the 1880s; the second addresses the Fabian policy of permeating the Liberal party in the 1880s and 90s, and reaction to the rise of Labour and socialist unification; the third turns to the Second International and European socialism in the 1890s and 1900s; and the fourth moves wholly into the Edwardian period, focusing on New Liberalism, and Fabian attitudes to imperialism, protectionism, and free trade. The final, one cannot help feeling somewhat aborted, chapter explores Shaw's idea of the equality of incomes, his notorious accommodation of twentieth-century dictatorships, and his paradoxical support for both reform and revolution. What holds all these chapters together is the argument that Shaw's socialism was originally constructed in opposition to both Marxism and Liberalism, as a "negation" of existing alternatives (165) but was reversed after 1905 to assimilate or incorporate both. Alexander's range of reference is impressive: most of the politically significant individuals of the three decades, from William Gladstone, J. A. Hobson, and L. T. Hobhouse to Henry George, H. M. Hyndman, and William Morris, from Friedrich Engels, Eduard Bernstein, and Karl Kautsky to Joseph Chamberlain, John Morley, and Sidney and Beatrice Webb, make an appearance. Hitherto obscure articles and lectures are analysed on a par with famous works like the *Fabian Essays in Socialism*, *The*

Quintessence of Ibsenism, and *Fabianism and the Empire*. Alexander evokes Shaw's anarchic individualism, his ambivalences, reversals, and controversies, indeterminacies, ironies, and paradoxes, his "desire to affront" and "reluctance to commit," to great effect (8).

But the book is not without its flaws. Despite its claim to be a "contextual" rather than a "textual" study (12), it dwells more on the contents of essays, articles, and lectures than on the events and movements to which they responded; it takes the political history that underpins the history of ideas a bit too much for granted. People and organisations are introduced with little background explanation or scene setting; a reader not versed in the intricacies of turn-of-the-century socialist and Liberal politics will feel a distinct lack of exposition. Although the overall argument is clear, chapters are not always well structured internally, and in places the analysis becomes muddled and repetitive or marred by an opinionated tone that is rarely encountered in academic monographs. The closing chapter in particular reads like special pleading, an attempt to exonerate Shaw's unpalatable views in the interwar years, and the book ends on an unconvincing note with grandiloquent claims about Shaw's "(almost) absolute transcendence of his circumstances" (225). In the Introduction Alexander disapproves of the "misplaced reverence" for their subject evinced by some "Shavians" (11), but his approach is in its own way no less partisan. In fact, the Fabians, with Shaw at their head (though his relations with the Society were never straightforward [197]), emerge as the only serious socialists worthy of consideration (36, 65-6, 102), the only grown-ups in a crowd of fools. It is as if Shaw's criticisms of everyone and everything, and especially of his fellow socialists of various stripes, were taken at face value, not queried but tacitly endorsed. Other socialist societies and parties, British and European, are dismissed either directly or by implication. Despite the meticulous work of recent historians like Graham Johnson, the Social Democratic Federation is reduced to a caricature of itself, and the portrayal of William Morris's Socialist League as an anarchist outfit (32) is

as misleading as the off-hand assertion that H. G. Wells was not a socialist (202). There are few minor irritants – such as the apparently unmotivated use of variant spellings of *laissez-faire/laisser-faire* – and much admirable research in *Shaw's Controversial Socialism*. But there is also a sufficient dose of controversy – as far as its depiction of the socialist scene and its reading of Shaw's politics are concerned – to have pleased Shaw himself.